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Towards students' learning activities in an MA translation module: An interview-based study

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the experience of learning from the student's perspective and is based upon a phenomenological approach to education studies, investigating the relationships between approaches, conceptions, contexts and outcomes of learning. Students' interview data were collected and analysed in order to investigate the complex relationships between different factors in the nested model of student learning (Meyer 2011).

This research reveals that learning processes have close connections with students' intentions, motivation, and conceptions of learning. Moreover, the context of learning also plays an important role in the complex learning system. Secondly, students' prior knowledge or background plays an important role in their learning process. For example, blank knowledge or troublesome knowledge of translation theories can obstruct a student from taking deep approaches toward learning, inhibiting their ability to achieve in-depth understanding of, and creative thinking about, reading materials.

The findings of this research can effectively be applied to the teaching of this module. 1) It is vital to provide students with clear task requirements (i.e. learning aims and presentation standards) at the beginning of the teaching activity. 2) Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge in MA transla-

tion teaching should be taken into account. A focus on threshold concepts enables teachers to make refined decisions about what is fundamental to a grasp of the subject they are teaching. It is a ‘less is more’ approach to curriculum design (Cousin 2006:4).

Keywords: learning intention, learning motivation, conception of learning, threshold concepts

1. Introduction

This paper aims to study different conceptions, motivations, intentions, and approaches in relation to learning as conceived by students on an MA translation seminar module. The focus of this research is students’ learning activities under a particular learning environment, bearing in mind that “...student learning is a complex multi-dimensional and multivariate phenomenon that cannot be decontextualised” (Meyer 2007: 1104). Three students’ interview data were collected to analyze the complex relationships between different factors in the nested model of student learning.

Three Chinese students at Durham University volunteered to attend an interview about learning activities after I explained in class the purpose of the interview and what would be involved. Each of them had a BA degree from a Chinese university and is pursuing a one-year taught MA degree in Translation Studies. As the programme supports the learning of candidates who wish to pursue careers as translators and research scholars in Translation Studies, the students are provided with both theoretical and practical training. The seminar module I designed embodies a combination of learning and research processes. Students are asked to read three academic papers on a focused topic each week, with six of them being asked to give presentations in front of the class. However, different conceptions, motivations and intentions towards learning and research lead to different learning approaches (such as surface or deep reading), which further produce different learning outcomes.

2. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this paper focuses on the experience of learning from the student’s perspective and is based upon a phenomenological approach to research that has been widely applied by researchers over the last thirty-five years, investigating the relationships between the learners’ approaches to studying, their conceptions of learning, the learning context and learning outcomes. The first pioneer research examining students’ learning derives from research by Marton and Säljö (1976), which distinguishes ‘deep approaches’ and ‘surface approaches’ to learning. The dichotomic “deep-

surface” approaches were further elaborated by Ramsden, who describes the “deep approach” as correlating with an intention to understand and focuses on ‘what is signified’ , while the surface approach correlates with an intention only to complete task requirements and focuses on the ‘signs’ and related parts of the task (Ramsden 1992:46). In the present research, if a student relates previous knowledge to new knowledge, or relates theoretical ideas to practice, and so on, it can be predicated that s/he takes a deep reading approach. However, if s/he only extracts information from designated papers into his or her presentation, or fails to apply the principles to analysing practical cases, a surface approach to reading is indicated.

According to Meyer’s (2011) nested model of learning, the learning process is mainly and directly influenced (though that may vary with time and discipline context) by the intentions, motivations and conceptions of learning. Learning intention in the above mentioned model essentially refers to what students are trying to accomplish in a given learning context and is distinguished by ‘acquisition of meaning’ , ‘reproducing what is being learned’ and ‘striving towards personal achievement’ . Motivation is a prime determinant of human behaviour, and learning behaviour in particular; and is operationalised in the Approaches to Studying Inventory (Entwistle and Ramsden 1983) in ‘intrinsic’ , ‘extrinsic’ and ‘strategic’ terms (Meyer 2011:13-14). Conceptions of learning represent one important form of prior knowledge, as do associated epistemological beliefs, that students bring with them to any learning task (Meyer 2011:13). Säljö (1979) produced five qualitatively different conceptions of learning, which include ‘increase in knowledge’ , ‘memorization’ , ‘acquisition of utilization of facts’ , ‘abstraction of meaning’ and ‘understanding reality’ . Conceptions of learning are further operationalised in ‘accumulative’ and ‘transformative’ terms in earlier versions of the Reflections on Learning Inventory (Meyer and Boulton-Lewis 1997). Van Rossum and Schenk (1984) found that students with transformational conceptions of learning were more likely to adopt a ‘deep’ approach to learning than students with accumulative conceptions.

Based on the above conceptual framework, the interview questions cover different factors in students’ learning processes, with particular attention to their conceptions of learning and research, their learning intentions and motivation in the module, and their process of reading academic papers. The observation by means of interview data not only helps to understand the complex relationships within the nested learning model, but also serves as valuable feedback on the teaching activities (including the module design). The relationship between learning context (learning environment, content, task demands, etc.) and learning process is also discussed at the end of this paper.

3. Case studies

3.1 Student interview case 1

In this paper, Jane is used as the pseudonym of the first interviewee. When asked about the conceptions of learning, she responded as follows:

I think learning at this stage (MA study)^①, er, should be more driven and motivated for the students to find information on their own, and teacher will give less guidance (compared with UG study) on the teaching materials, and the student must be equipped with skills to find information, and be critical to the information obtained either from internet or books. Within this learning process, I could always generate some new understanding towards some existing matters.

This is a typical transformative conception of learning, since, in Jane's mind, learning is not just a means of increasing knowledge, storing information and applying what has been accumulated, but looking for information, critiquing existing knowledge and generating new understanding on existing matters. Moreover, her arguments that "learning is for the students to find information on their own" and "(students should) be critical to the information obtained from internet or books" reveal a research attitude towards learning, which could be further supported by her conceptions of research:

Research in my opinion, compared to learning, er, is a similar form of learning, only research is to conduct some kind of learning into the field that you are not familiar with, or the subject which is newly found, and requires to be discovered. There is not much existing information or guidance you could follow in this field and you should first read a lot of existing materials about it, and, and second, you should be critical on your reading; and third, you could, you probably could generate some hypothesis of your own, and lastly, you could carry on some experiments to testify your hypothesis and generate a conclusion.

It can be seen that Jane has a very similar understanding of learning and research. Her conception of research can be regarded as a combination of (A) research as information gathering, (C) insightful exploration and discovery, (F) the re-examination of existing knowledge, and (G) identifying and solv-

^① Words in bracket in interview data are provided by the author, with an intention to facilitate the understanding of excerpted interview content.

ing problems in Meyer's "eight categories in conceptions of research" (Meyer 2007:1108). Bearing the above mentioned conceptions of learning and research in mind, Jane described the following learning activities in the interview report:

As for reading materials, I made use of them with a selective attitude. After all, the presentation is not like a book report, the targets of group presentations are to work out collective goal and to reach our own conclusion... Also we (group members) were critical to authors' thoughts, provided the class with our critical thinking during the presentation. As for my independent research, er, I had conducted relative research activities, including searching information from books, online searching. In case of the presentation preparation, I sometimes chose other scholars' opinions related to the topic, both criticizing and supporting views... And yes I did have some reflections and revisions after presentation, but not systematically, sometimes I took the comments from tutors and I could find the gap between my performance and their expectations. Sometimes tutors' suggestions were not prescriptive, more like guidelines and I would apply these suggestions to my future presentations and essay writings.

Jane's process of learning appears to match a deep learning approach, which is characterized as "focusing on what is signified (i.e. the author's argument) and relating previous knowledge to new knowledge" (Ramsden 1992:46). In the process of learning, she takes a selective attitude towards reading materials, applies her own critical thinking to papers, and also relates other scholars' opinions to her current reading materials. Jane's learning approaches are closely related to her conceptions of learning. With transformative learning conceptions, she would be reluctant to make her presentation superficial, like a book report, but rather do some research on a given topic, including collecting information from internal and external resources, generating critical ideas and drawing a conclusion, as well as carrying out post revision and reflection after presentation.

Moreover, Jane's learning approaches are also connected with her learning motivation. When asked about her learning motivation in this module, she claimed as follows:

To conduct the above mentioned learning activities, initially, (the motivation comes) from my module requirements. I need to meet the module requirements to successfully achieve my degree. After that, I have strong curiosities and interests to this module, which is translation studies, and want to achieve the accurate and deep understanding of this subject.

According to Marton and Säljö (1984:52), intrinsic motivation (interest) seems to lead to a deep

approach and extrinsic motivation (concern with demands) to a surface approach. Jane's initial motivation, which is about module requirements or task demands, can be regarded as extrinsic motivation; however, strongly prompted by her second motivation, which comes from her curiosity towards and interest in this module, she mainly takes deep approaches in her learning process.

Finally, this paper tries to investigate the potential relationships among “conceptions of learning”, “learning intention” and “learning approaches” based on Jane's following opinions on her learning intentions:

By learning this module, I can firstly accumulate a lot of knowledge about translation and linguistic and cultural aspects. And secondly, I could sort out the relations between different theories put forward by different (translation) schools, thus to have a clear picture of translation studies. And thirdly, I expected to be more rational towards those controversial ideas and theories which I learned in China.

With transformative conceptions of learning, Jane's desired outcome to this module was not limited only to increase knowledge, but extended to sort out relations between different translation theories and improve her capability on rationally understanding of controversial ideas. That is why in her process of learning, she would feed her peers with critical thinking in her presentation, instead of simply making a book report.

3.2 Student interview case 2

George is the pseudonym of the second interviewee, who describes his conceptions of learning as follows:

First, I think that learning is a kind of knowledge and information accumulation, but, but learning is not just that, I mean, it also means to apply what we've learned to practical things.

The above-mentioned ‘knowledge accumulation’ and ‘knowledge application’ belong to the category of ‘accumulative learning conceptions’ in Meyer's nested model of learning (Meyer 2011:12). Based on his understanding of learning, George's conception of research arguably differs from his conception of learning: “Research is not just about paper or other products; we should understand it as a process of finding the truth in academic areas; also to change some existing ideas, to correct some misunderstanding”. It is interesting that George establishes a clear borderline between learning and research: ‘knowledge acquisition and application’ are understood as learning, while ‘changing

existing ideas', 'correcting former misunderstanding' and 'finding out truth' belong to the domain of research. Such conceptions of research combine (B) discovering the truth, (F) the re-examination of existing knowledge and (H) a set of misconceptions in Meyer's (2007) category. With the help of the above conceptions of learning and research, George understood his learning process as follows:

For my own presentation duties, the most important thing comes to my mind is finding out the key points, which should be clear and brief. Then I will find out some supportive materials and examples, I personally would like to use a lot of video clips which are very vivid...My reflection was mainly based on tutors' comments and suggestions. In every presentation, there will be a Q & A section, a comment and discussion section, when the tutors and other classmates will provide us with their ideas and opinions about our presentations, and then when we were preparing for presentations a few weeks later, we will try to avoid such failures we made last time. I seldom did revision on my presentation slides, mainly because the presentations were not required to be written into articles.

George's learning activities include finding out key points and using examples to support these points. His reflections are mainly based on external suggestions and he seldom makes revisions because it is not strictly required for the module. His learning approach is mainly a surface approach, as it "treats the task as an external imposition" (Ramsden 1992: 46). When asked about his approaches toward reading academic papers, the surface learning approaches were clearly demonstrated:

For my presentation paper, in order to achieve, I mean, to fulfill the standard of presentation, I have to do so, I have to know in depth about my article, so that I could handle the Q and A section, make good interaction with the audience...(But for papers to be presented by others) Since this module is not compulsory, I don't have to learn that much as there's no final examination, so that's why I don't have enough motivation to read all of the provided articles. I think if I could sit in the class and listen to others' presentations, that would be enough for me.

The above answer also reveals a close relationship between motivation and approaches to learning activities. George's motivation for learning mainly comes from extrinsic arousal, such as task demands or learning requirements. In order to fulfill the module requirements, he takes his presentation papers quite seriously, spending more than two hours reading one article; however, in the case of the papers to be presented by others, he spends only half an hour skimming all the 3-4 papers. He also frankly replied to the question about his learning motivation:

My motivation is mainly from the demand of my major, translation studies. In this seminar, there is lots of information and knowledge about translation theories, otherwise I could not accomplish (the task), as in the future it is very important, I have to do so. That's my basic motivation.

In the case of learning intentions, George gave the following answer:

First is to acquire knowledge and information from this course, which is my basic intention. The second is, er, I can enhance my presentation skills during the class. Another thing I want to mention is, I want to improve my research ability by attending this module, but it is not that visible. During the process of this seminar, I found that when I try to read an article and to prepare for a presentation, I will have lots of ideas, how to structure these ideas, how to make it (the presentation) understood by the audience, and that is also similar to research.

The first intention is about 'acquisition of meaning', while the second and third intentions are about 'striving towards personal achievements', such as presentation and research skills. Bearing the above learning intentions in mind, George's learning process is mainly focused on information accumulation and personal skill improvement. His reply about achievements and progress in this module indicates that his learning outcomes are achieved through the process of learning, which is also influenced or functioned by intention and motivation. Here is his answer about learning outcomes:

Yes, I have had lots of achievements through this seminar, first one is knowledge and information accumulation and acquiring, and second is communication skills and presentation abilities. Another interesting thing is about how to find research interests, you know when I read materials, make my presentation or listen to classmates' reports, I could always find out something to agree, and something to disagree, during this learning process, I could find out my research interests finally.

3.3 Student interview case 3

Sally is the pseudonym of the third interviewee, who also displays accumulative conceptions of learning as revealed by her following statements:

To me, postgraduate study is nonetheless an accumulation of knowledge. From postgraduate

study, I can learn a lot of new knowledge on translation theories and I can apply these theories in my translation practices. And, compared with undergraduate study, it is more career-related. Postgraduate study is much more systematic.

When asked about her conception of research, Sally said:

I have to learn from other people's opinions. Then from the knowledge I learn, I should discover the truth and attribute some findings on certain topics and all these findings should be creative and original. For some topic, I always have some initial understanding, and through research, I can have deeper understanding of it. Sometimes the research results are different from what I have imagined.

This suggests that in Sally's mind, research is first of all about 'information gathering'; then 'discovering the truth'; then followed by 'the re-examination of existing knowledge; and finally related to 'insightful exploration and discovery' (cf. Meyer 2007). Research is a part of learning for Sally, who believes that "there are many methods for learning, and research is one. In order to conduct the research works, one needs to learn from other research works' findings and opinions on some certain topic, and this knowledge accumulation is itself a process of learning. So, it's also a way of learning to do creative research." Such an understanding of research is supported by Meyer's (2007) model of postgraduate research-as-learning, in which engagement in postgraduate research is viewed as a learning process with summatively assessed outcomes (theses or dissertations).

Sally's learning intentions are a combination of 'acquiring meaning' and 'personal achievement' (e.g. presentation skills), as indicated by her words: "I noticed all the seminar papers are about translation theories, so I would like to obtain full understanding of the translation schools. Besides, I'm also expecting to improve my presentation skills by attending these seminars". And her motivation for learning in this module is a combination of the "intrinsic" and the "extrinsic" factors, as can be seen in her words: "I myself have the motivation to learn, and this module really gives me a good direction and improves my learning efficiency".

Based on the above information, we can go further in analyzing her learning approaches as demonstrated in the process of learning:

For the provided reading materials, I read them and try to understand the author's thoughts which I then compare with other scholars' opinions. The most important thing is to seek application of those opinions into translation practice, which could improve my own translation

efficiency.

Basically, the presentation consists of three parts. The first part is the introduction of the author's opinions, which accounts for almost 40% of my presentation. The second part is to talk about other scholars' findings and then bring forward my own thoughts, which takes about 30% of the presentation time. The last part is the illustration of all the thoughts and opinions I've just presented, by using some examples, to show how to apply these theoretical thoughts into translation practice.

It is clear that Sally takes a deep-level learning approach, through which she can dynamically associate the author's thoughts with other scholars' opinions, and effectively apply translation theories to her translation practice. 30% of her presentation consists of her own thoughts and understanding about the topic, and 30% is about applying theory to practice. Such presentation behaviour can obviously be placed in Ramsden's (1992: 46) deep learning category, which is 'relating theoretical ideas to everyday experience'.

According to Van Rossum and Schenk (1984), if someone takes accumulative conceptions of learning, s/he is less likely to adopt deep-level approaches to learning. But in Sally's case, we may understand that it is her strong 'intrinsic' motivation for learning in this module that encourages her to take a deep approach to learning (Marton and Säljö 1984:52). Moreover, deep approaches to learning are typified by an intention to understand and seek meaning, leading students to attempt to relate concepts to existing understanding and to each other, to distinguish between new ideas and existing knowledge, and to critically evaluate and determine key concepts (Fry et al. 2003:11). Based on the above analysis, I concluded that the links between motivation, intention, conceptions and approaches to learning are not simple and clear ones. Deep observation and careful analysis are needed in order to understand their complex connections.

4. Reflections and implications for teaching practice

This present research on learning activities in a postgraduate seminar is based on the theoretical rationale that MA learning involves a student-centered model of teaching (Biggs and Tang 2007: 19) utilising a deep approach to learning (Prosser and Trigwell 1999). For this module, I define the tutor's duties as designing the module syllabus, preparing selected reading materials, organizing the learning activities and acting as observer and commentator in the Question & Answer section. This idea reflects Kiraly's (2000) social constructivist approach to translator education, which suggests

that “rather than teaching correct answers (truth) to my student, it is my pedagogical task to scaffold learning, provide substantial support for knowledge construction early in the course or programme, and gradually relinquish control over the learning environment to the students themselves” (2000:68). The interviews have provided me with much scope for reflection on the scholarship of learning and teaching at postgraduate level.

First of all, the above study supports the argument that students' learning processes are closely related to, and connected with, their intentions, motivation, and conceptions of learning. Furthermore, the context of learning also plays an important role in the complex learning system. For example, the demands of the task have a direct impact on learning motivation, and then affect the learning processes. When asked about reading time spent on academic papers, all of the interviewed students said that they spent most time on their own presentation papers, a moderate amount of time on the papers presented by their group members, and least time on papers presented by other groups. Incentivised by the presentation task as a performance in front of the whole class, a student usually tries his/her best in their reading to achieve a full understanding of the article to be analysed and presented by him/herself. In addition to this, in order to act as a good team member during group discussions, s/he also spares some time to read the articles that are due to be presented by other members of his/her group. Meanwhile, if his/her group does not have a presentation task, s/he spends very little time on reading even though s/he has been asked to read thoroughly all of the material every week.

Secondly, students' prior knowledge or background also plays an important role in the learning system. George's main weakness in this course is his scanty knowledge of translation theory; as he puts it:

My weakness lies in my knowledge background; I am not good at translation theories, and do not have lots of knowledge about theories putting forward by experts. So whenever I prepare the presentation, it is hard for me to jump out of the provided papers.

Such weakness, being a ‘threshold’ (cf. Meyer and Land 2003) in his process of learning, has hindered him from taking a deep approach towards his learning. Based on the interview data, I found that George seldom mentions critical thinking or creative ideas; however, he mentions frequently his improvement in presentation skills, which is precisely his main strength in this module. While Jane's strength lies in her solid knowledge of translation theories and linguistics, as she puts it:

As an English major student, I have gained some knowledge about theories of translation and linguistics, which is my strength in this module. When talking about reading, I can quickly get

good general understanding of the given materials, and that will facilitate my understanding of the given topic.

Having been equipped with prior knowledge on translation and linguistic theories, she is dissatisfied with just “memorizing information for assessments^①” and prefers to carry out research on translation theories and concepts. She demonstrated great initiative in her learning process, and her presentations were not limited to the reading materials provided.

According to Biggs and Tang (2007: 25), desirable student learning depends both on student-based factors — ability, appropriate prior knowledge, clearly accessible new knowledge — and on the teaching context, which includes teacher responsibility, informed decision making and good management. The present case study has provided me not only with deep understanding of the variations in student learning and relations among different sub-families in such a big and complex family of learning (Meyer 2011:1), but also with some implications for the teaching of this module.

1. Two students mentioned in their interviews that in the module guidelines, aspects such as tutors’ expectations for presentations and the task requirements, were not clearly spelled out at the beginning of the module. Their comments reminded me of the importance of the learning environment for learning and teaching activities, including the provision of clear learning goals and standards. The above feedback was very helpful for the teaching of this module and I will certainly provide students with much clearer module guidelines in the coming academic years.

2. The learning process is highly driven by learning motivation, which is related to the task demands and module requirements. In the present module, it is necessary to extend the discussion section to enable more students to get involved in the seminar. Driven by the requirement to participate in the discussions, students might be more willing to read the academic articles even when they are not asked to make presentations.

3. Discovering students’ weaknesses and strengths in relation to this particular module by means of a questionnaire at the beginning of this module could be helpful in assigning students to groups. Based on their educational backgrounds, tutors can put students with different strengths into each group, so that students can benefit from communicating with group members during group discussions.

4. The interviews also confirmed the validity of the original decision to include these teaching activities in this module, although they are not strictly a core part of it (they are not directly summatively assessed). Students found the task demands were appropriate, and the module content design clear and well systemized. Although demanding, the tasks were viewed as reasonable, something which

① A typical feature of the surface learning approach (Ramsden 1992: 46).

helped the students to improve their skills without affecting their self-confidence in their postgraduate study. They appreciated that the tutors could always give them appropriate support during seminars. More importantly, when asked about their learning outcomes, all of them had positive replies: apart from gaining knowledge about translation studies, they have been becoming more critical towards existing theories. What confirmed for me the validity of the module is the following statement about learning outcomes: "I now understood that learning is a reflective and a long-term process, not just short-term knowledge accumulation. The study towards MA degree is just a starting point for future lifelong learning." That means, what the student learned from this module is not just information and knowledge about translation, but a profound understanding of learning itself.

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Appendix: Interview questions

1. How do you understand learning as a postgraduate student? How do you understand research as a postgraduate student?
2. What are your main strengths and weaknesses in the MA graduate seminar class?
3. What do you expect of the MA graduate seminar module? (Or what is your desired learning outcome?)
4. In order to meet your expectations of this module, what did you do in the process of learning? For example. How did you make use of the reading materials provided? What about your independent research as well as collaborative research with team members? How did you prepare for your presentations? What about your reflections and revision after making your presentation?
5. In what ways did you find the above learning activities useful?
6. Could you please comment on the learning environment, content, task demands, and tutors' support for this particular module?
7. Could you please comment on your achievements and progress in this module so far?

Please answer the following questions about reading academic papers for this module.

8. What are your desired outcomes after reading the articles provided? (Or what are you trying to accomplish after reading?)
9. In what way do you read the materials provided? (Could you describe in detail your reading process: the article for your own presentation, the articles for other presenters in your group, and the articles when your group is not making presentation?) And what is your motivation to read these academic papers? (Or how far do you feel the need to read these papers?)
10. Could you always achieve your desired outcomes after reading those papers?

Thank you very much for attending the interview!